

The Role of Local Agencies in the Cold War in Africa

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Abstract: This article examines the role of local agencies in shaping Cold War dynamics in Africa, moving beyond the traditional focus on superpower interventions. The study explores how local actors influenced political alliances, military strategies, and economic policies within the geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Using case studies from Ghana, Angola, and Mozambique and incorporating oral interviews with former decision-makers, the research highlights the agency of African states and grassroots organizations in navigating external pressures. The findings reveal that local agencies were not passive recipients of superpower aid but active participants in shaping Cold War strategies to align with national interests. The study adopts a historical and qualitative methodological approach, analyzing archival documents, police records, and firsthand accounts. The results suggest that Cold War rivalries contributed to long-term political and economic developments in Africa, underscoring the enduring impact of local agencies in global conflicts.

Keywords: Cold War, Africa, local agency, superpower influence

Résumé : Cet article examine le rôle des agences locales dans la dynamique de la Guerre froide en Afrique, en dépassant le cadre traditionnel axé sur les interventions des superpuissances. L'étude explore comment les acteurs locaux ont influencé les alliances politiques, les stratégies militaires et les politiques économiques au sein de la compétition géopolitique entre les États-Unis et l'Union soviétique. En s'appuyant sur des études de cas au Ghana, en Angola et au Mozambique, ainsi que sur des entretiens oraux avec d'anciens décideurs, la recherche met en lumière l'agence des États africains et des organisations locales face aux pressions extérieures. Les résultats révèlent que les agences locales n'étaient pas de simples bénéficiaires passifs de l'aide des superpuissances, mais des participants actifs dans l'élaboration des stratégies de la Guerre froide, alignées sur leurs intérêts nationaux. L'étude adopte une approche méthodologique historique et qualitative, en analysant des archives, des rapports de police et des témoignages de première main. Les conclusions suggèrent que les rivalités de la Guerre froide ont

contribué aux développements politiques et économiques à long terme en Afrique, soulignant l'impact durable des agences locales dans les conflits mondiaux.

Mots-clés : Guerre froide, Afrique, agence locale, influence des superpuissances

Introduction

The Cold War profoundly shaped African political landscapes, with Western Africa, particularly Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, and Mali, serving as some of the earliest battlegrounds for Cold War influence. During this period, the Soviet Union and a coalition of Western powers, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and anti-communist African governments, competed for ideological and political dominance. This article seeks to move beyond conventional analyses that primarily emphasize superpower interventions, instead focusing on the role of local African agencies in shaping Cold War dynamics.

The study examines how local actors in Ghana, Angola, Mozambique, and other regions influenced Cold War alliances, military strategies, and political reforms. Unlike traditional narratives that portray African states as passive recipients of Cold War pressures, this research highlights how local agencies navigated geopolitical competition, leveraging superpower rivalries to advance national and regional interests.

Rather than being mere instruments of Cold War polarization, local African actors actively engaged in strategies of alignment, non-alignment, and political resistance. By investigating how these groups and governments operated within and beyond the structures imposed by the Cold War, this study sheds light on the nuanced, complex interactions between global and local forces. Through case studies and archival research, the paper demonstrates how local agencies responded to and shaped Cold War politics, reinforcing the broader significance of African agency in global conflicts.

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1. Background of the Cold War in Africa

The Cold War's nature, impact, and outcome in Africa represented a different experience from those in Europe, North America, and Asia. Scholars have argued that African Cold War politics was unique and shaped by distinct historical contexts and political landscapes (Allor Awinsong, 2017). Issues such as decolonization, the role of ex-colonial powers, and the state formation processes contributed to the singularity of the Cold War in Africa. Traditional Cold War studies emphasize the European theatre as the epicenter of the conflict, neglecting the significant events and trends happening outside the continent. African countries gained independence under different circumstances and played quintessential roles in the Cold War. Although caught between the two superpowers and encouraging domestic and regional problems, African states have not only been subjected to external pressures. They also took advantage of the superpower competition to play one against the other and create enough flexibility to improve their position.

The inception of the Cold War established a world geopolitical scene in which the superpowers vied for influence, and the rest of the nations responded by asserting their neutrality or making choices. The relative inertia of the de-colonial moments overshadowed the complex political landscape and the local conditions of the newly independent African countries. As the superpower circle drew in African states, the political arenas within the selected African countries began to witness a shift of external competition from European states to the USSR and USA. Using this geopolitical opportunity, local agencies in these African states have devised measures and strategies to appropriate foreign influences that best suit the national political objectives. Although external pressures in the form of structural adjustment had greatly impeded the success of local agencies, the end of the Cold War left enough flexibility for the various African states to maneuver their political and economic system.

2. Significance of Local Agencies in the Cold War

Tensions in the Cold War have long been identified with the global North. Yet, local agencies and individuals were equally essential in forming alliances and conducting proxy wars, particularly in Africa. In this respect, local agencies were significant actors in the global Cold War, as they played key roles in shaping national identity and governance. Through the investigative case studies of four nations across the Cold War and in the immediate post-Cold War era and oral interviews with former decision-makers of these organizations, this project makes a case for the significance of local agencies. It argues that local agencies were active actors rather than passive recipients of superpower interests and aid. Consider how local agencies sought to address and resolve the dichotomy of local needs and external pressures, particularly in forming political alliances, military strategies, and economic development.

The study proposes that local agencies were critical bridges and the embodiment of the local-global nexus — they sought to create and maintain conduits between their nations and the superpowers, adapting the forms of international support to local contexts. It is argued that grassroots connections enabled local agencies to make rational decisions with a localized appeal and that this ability for local ownership and understanding made it easier to mobilize populations. The importance of local agencies was not confined to the temporal boundaries of the Cold War. However, it was manifest in post-Cold War developments and transitions, highlighting the enduring legacy of these organizations. In doing so, this research reveals the significance and contribution of local agencies in a broader Cold War topography and the formation of the global South, further problematizing a priori assumptions of the Cold War narrative.

3. Colonial Legacy and Nationalism

In exploring the role of local agencies in the Cold War in Africa, it is essential to consider colonialism's profound impact on African nations' political and social landscape during this period. The scope of this impact has been long-lasting and has defined the contours of contemporary struggles. Colonially ruled territories were often highly fragmented and divided along ethnically or religiously constructed boundaries aimed at fostering divisions and undermining possible unities that could challenge these oppressive structures.

Challenges posed to local agencies, such as in the form of (internal) tribalism, lasted well into the time after independence. Colonial education did not prepare the indigenous population for governance, and governance structures were largely kept in post-independence societies. Underneath these power structures simmered contested relationships between tribes, milestones, people, and institutions shaped by colonization and, subsequently, took on a life of their own. These colonial

legacies were compounded by the administration of emerging forms of nationalism that reacted to them in as many ways as deemed necessary when trying to assert autonomy and sovereignty (Myrice, 2015).

The superpowers easily took advantage of African defensiveness and unanimity as tools; there was no single African response to the complexities of the post-war superpower order. National leaders also joined global structures or cooperated with Western states on a bilateral and military basis to obtain capital, technology, and weapons. At times, there was a strong desire to stay outside of ideology. The nation's education, culture, and scripts were defended against subversion. Hardly any remaining structures want to be nationalized or renegotiated on new and equitable terms. A charismatic leader spelled out a clear path. Imperialism, especially in the economic form of multinational corporations, wanted to leave the country because of post-candidate nationalism and was regarded as a threat. Predatory forces, internal or external, were condemned, causing conflict or leading to forming a national front to tackle and handle conflict.

3.1. Impact of Colonialism on African Nations

The backdrop to the Cold War in Africa is a critical theme shaping the myriad of local agencies embroiled in superpower contests on the continent. This section explores the impact of colonial rule on the development of African nations, which is critical for understanding the creation of local actors that shaped the patterns of the Cold War in Africa. The colonial rule for many in Africa meant exploiting resources and military service to alien rulers and the accompanying displacement and disruption of traditional governance patterns. The political identities and conflicts are, to some extent, rooted in the colonial past, thus the shaping of 'national' identities and developing rival 'nations' within the colonial boundaries (Myrice, 2015).

Colonial rule was respectively violent and brutal to the diverse people who made up Africa. Whether it was obtaining resources, labor, or territory, the priority of the colonial states was swiftly and bloodily enforced. The brutalization of the colonized, especially the 'military' recruitment to serve in the bloody colonial incursions of East Africa, continues to shape political consciousness today. Because the colonial polity was never subjected to either a class-based revolution or an anticolonial nationalist one, colonial states ruled through an effective system of 'divide and rule' that turned myriad internal divisions, constantly created by colonial policies, into external differences between alien and closely related natives (who may also be defined via colonial policies as 'citizens' and 'wards' or only the latter). Few postcolonial regimes were immune to the effects of these divisions or the constant danger of insurrection, the more so as weak central state administration, in turn, often rested upon local power bases that could be and were successfully mobilized for partitionist settlement or defense.

The redrawing of the colonial map in Africa and establishing statehood, subsequently accepted by the UN as the rightful claimant of the mantle of power, carried with it the mandatory preservation of state borders. Because these borders were set down with scant consideration to the local dynamics of power and grievances that played a large part in the colonial tribulations of state administration, the inheritance has been a series of often cripplingly afflicted postcolonial states, none able to fully conquer its 'ancestral' Als. The above underlines the immediate resonance of events in neighboring states as Zimbabwe, between 1976 and 1980, came to self-rule, thereby providing a useful-seemingly necessary segway into a broader discussion of the 'nationalism' that in many parts of Africa acted as a response to the colonial experience. Such provinces also highlight the realities of the Cold War, which too often seem to be abstracted in the African context from the historical realities of both colonial and postcolonial sighting battles. For many in eastern and southern Africa, the Cold War was experienced in practice as the instigation of one or other Brezhnev between anticolonial nationalist forces (not always victoriously, and the ongoing legacy of the Red Menace among Cold War hobs led in this effect to a large degree by readers of the London daily press).

3.2. Emergence of Nationalist Movements

After centuries of colonial oppression and foreign domination, Africa was to arouse and regain its agency and cultural identity. Movements with these aims emerged everywhere on the continent, moved by Pan Africanist spirit and aspiration to Socialism in its different colors (Allor Awinsong, 2017). In almost all ex-European colonies in Africa, these movements were silenced by brute violent force and only partly succeeded. While conversely trying to come into the footwear of colonial powers, both superpowers were meddling in their internal affairs, first to halt the expansion of the oppositional bloc and second to turn these postcolonial countries into their sphere of influence. Local agencies resisting foreign influence and aspiring for self-determination were formed, usually emerging from the ardent parts of the local populace following the initial success and full rise of nationalist aspirations. Everywhere forces of status quo have been startled by local passion and idealism and must view with dismay that Africans have gone through an adolescent crisis and that they will henceforward display against regard for economies, security, or life itself that civilizations have cherished in their youth (Myrice, 2015). The nature of the danger shifts according to time and place.

Within the haze of political sermons, propaganda, intelligence, and reports, the quality and dimensions of the danger could readily be exaggerated. An exceptional opportunity or challenge was posed to African countries to develop in

the era of decadence into a cooperative cluster of self-reliant states, safeguarding cultural heritages by sustainable development, greeting renewable energy sources, and optimizing water management. Implementing such a leap would depend on fitting in such a vision to harmonize local approaches and agencies with global development potentials and threats. To this day, these potentials have been restricted by the deepening development gulf and fierce competition between the main economic powers, where predominant neoliberal doctrine has undermined social and cultural utilization, local approaches, and agencies.

4. Superpower Involvement in Africa

The history of donor-recipient relations in the postcolonial era has often been presented in either atomistic or one-way terms as actions initiated from one pole that directed "benefits" toward a mute and passive object. Cold War scholarship on the Global South has been criticized for failing to consider local agency by turning African states and leaders into mere pawns of superpower strategists (Allor Awinsong, 2017). However, the interests and initiatives of the superpowers were conditioned by local responses, strategies, and moves in Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Africa.

This article examines these multilevel interactions between local, regional, and global factors in this historical period. The focus is on the United States and the Soviet Union, matching the preponderant interest and concern of the superpowers. However, it is also important to note that the geopolitics of the Cold War in Africa cannot be reduced to bilateral dimensions and logic. First, the superpowers were not always equally involved in the southern region of Africa. Secondly, the growing competition between the superpowers led to a progressive multiplication of the venues and forms of conflict all over the continent. Thorda's geography highlights that the intersection of the engagements of the Cold War was also played out in southern African theatres, regions of interaction between local, port-continental, and global scales. French and British interests complemented or contradicted each other as part of the emerging European Economic Community (EEC), each looking for a new contractual relationship with its former colonies and turning to the ardors of development in its 'near abroad.' Coherent strategies, lucrative trade agreements, development programs, and a sense of strategic interdependence had to compete with conflicting pressures.

4.1. US and Soviet Union Interests in Africa

Following World War 2, Africa became a site of contestation over geopolitical influence between the two major powers. The United States began showing increasing interest in the continent and its resources. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was more interested in Africa as a region to spread communism. Multiple theaters of contestation arose out of the Cold War in Africa. The more direct theater was

the one between the African states themselves. Ideological differences were taken up by various governments in the region, leading to the alignment with one or the other of the superpowers.

In this way, independent African states were drawn into the orbit of one or the other of the superpowers. In the 1960s, with the independence of many African countries, the Soviet Union saw an opportunity to pull them into their sphere. This seemed significant at the time, as African countries and their support in world forums like the United Nations could change geopolitics in a significant way. The United States, finding themselves on the opposing side, sought to win the support of different local movements and governments, creating a complex and confusing landscape. The struggle intensified during the 1970s and 1980s, with each superpowers supporting opposing sides in civil conflicts. However, the "region" of Africa was only a very broad consideration, and as such, those seeking power were also willing to undercut each other to gain the advantage (Allor Awinsong, 2017). Ultimately, African states were able to assert their ability to act independently of their superpower allies, and the US and the USSR lost their grip on the region. However, this bid for allies did impact the type of diplomatic relationships developed with other states. The relationship Africa developed with the superpowers during the Cold War significantly impacted how those situations played out (Samson Mr Ojewale, 2018).

4.2. Military and Economic Aid

The struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union to control their global peripheries configured the international history of the Cold War. This struggle sapped local agencies' authority and independence and helped establish superpower dominance over international issues. The perceptions, resources, and strategies of Americans, Soviets, and other important state and non-state actors working in or concerning Third World nations were often decisive in national problems far from the metropolises of the superpowers. African borders were affected by the geopolitical calculations of the United States and the Soviet Union.

Such activities were closely related to South Africa's political independence and the global military and economic power of the United States and the Soviet Union. The biennial report of the South African Department of Defence for the fiscal years 1970-1971 noted that South Africa's borders had been attacked 274 times. A review of violent incidents in Namibia from December 1970 onward is also included. The South African report substantially evaluates African and international incidents influencing South African and American actions and perceptions (Allor Awinsong, 2017). As superpower actions constrained the political interests of many African nations, their local and national levels of tenets

were to be understood in the light of superpower border activities. Superpower border activities had more than 20 years of historical preparation. The unintended results of these activities that reshaped the destiny of many African nations further supported the case for their consideration.

5. Case Studies of Local Agencies

Research on the Cold War in Africa has often centered on the international dynamics, especially in the competition between the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR. While several studies have looked at various aspects of the indirect involvement and interventions by the superpowers, much less work has been done on examining the role of local agencies during the Cold War. This paper offers a timely exploration of this by using the critical atrocity lens to examine the interplay, (mis)perceptions, and reactions to escalating violence between local agencies, and also the latter and the superpowers, within the setting of a particular case study, the Mozambican War (1976-1992). It provides insights into the various local agencies that emerged during the conflict in Angola and Mozambique and how these shaped the local and national dynamics.

Case Study 1 examines the interaction of local agencies and superpower competition involving the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) in Angola. Case Study 2 looks at the agency and how this shaped the war outcomes in the internal conflicts experienced by Mozambique. These case studies serve to illustrate the complexity of the alliances and confrontations of local agencies vis-à-vis superpower interests, the strategies that some of these local agencies used to achieve their goals, and the degree to which they acted autonomously from their external sponsors whilst operating within constraints and seeking support and resources from these as well. In doing so, it is argued that, although the local agency was often limited, it remained an essential aspect of the conflict, shaping and, at times, constraining the wider movements and how these either escalated or de-escalated violence. This is highlighted by an examination of instances of successful local agencies and the obstacles that the majority met, suggesting, therefore, that when local agencies were successful and autonomous, these agencies played a significant role in both driving forward national liberation movements or peace processes but also, if more sporadically, resisting them. In this sense, examining local agencies underscores the multifaceted ways the Cold War was played out in Africa (Alexandre Costa, 2017).

5.1. Angola: MPLA, UNITA, and FNLA

As the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola – Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) seized power in Luanda, engaging in a tense stand-off with forces aligned to Holden Roberto's Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola – National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), the subsequent

civil war exacerbated tensions between Angolan ethnic groups, dragging in the interests of foreign actors. The genesis of the eighteenth-century frontier had been revisited as smaller, weaker groups were caught up in larger power struggles between the coastal city-states and the interior kingdoms. As the 1960s turned into the 70s, what had been a periphery under Portuguese dominion suddenly found itself jettisoned into the geopolitical center stage of the Cold War, and the ensuing struggle for these communities became as much about the distribution of scarce development resources as it was about the control of the political machine.

In the eyes of many, the conflict became associated with Angolan unity projects and an outlet for historical vendettas far removed from the more openly ambitious politicking in the Luandan metropole (Claassen, 2016). Contemporary media representations of this era suggest that sovereignty was handed to the MPLA by a departing, equally oppressive Portuguese regime. This narrative sometimes positions the civil war that followed as an exogenous event, lacking in historical depth. In this version of events, Angola's native agents are the creations of global powers, reduced to obeying whims dictated by Washington and Moscow. Such an interpretation simplifies the ideological complexity of this era. It neglects the myriad strategies undertaken by the MPLA, União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola – National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), and FNLA to consolidate their power in the pre-independence vacuum. For many Angolans, independence had been an unfulfilled ideal for centuries, existing only in the tenuous promise of a messianic seer or the vision of a folk tale. Independence was a decentralizing act of 'resurrection,' whereby this potent vision of the future reassembled long-standing cultural, social, and political expectations into tangible nationhood. The Cold War was but the latest set of superimposed state-crafting efforts. Indigenously derived agency drove these opposing strategies, the struggles of both unitary and fragmentary nationalists embodying a more complex and ambiguous set of allegiances than a simple pro-Soviet or pro-Western characterization allows.

5.2. Mozambique: FRELIMO and RENAMO

The liberation struggle for the independence of Mozambique began under Portuguese colonial rule in the mid-1960s and lasted until the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974. Soon after the victory, post-independence governance was challenged by a bitter internal political conflict that turned into overt warfare between the ruling Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) and the Mozambican National Resistance Movement (RENAMO). From 1975 until the early 1990s, Mozambique was buried by civil war, which left some one million dead and nearly a million more displaced. The war also obliterated the country's social and economic infrastructure beyond recognition.

There are many opinions in the literature about the origins of RENAMO and the causes of the war. Undoubtedly, these issues are among the most controversial in Mozambique's recent history. However, the positions held by external commentators on the subject are generally polar, often echoing wider political and academic debates regarding the role of external agencies in civil wars of the neoliberal period. Some blame RENAMO for merely implementing external designs while leaving the leadership and vision to the better-known ex-enemy, FRELIMO. Others argue that RENAMO was initially created and armed by external forces. Parallels are made to the insurgency in Angola or to the support for the mujahideen in Afghanistan. Although some accusations can be justified, particularly about RENAMO, the picture is far more complex and not always accurately depicted. Recent research on a decentralization process illustrates that local aspirations often influenced seemingly uniform projects imposed by the superpowers and their local allies. In the same way, the preliminary designs and aspirations of FRELIMO and RENAMO determined how they would interpret their international alliances despite the existence of agreement on much broader ideological grounds (Igreja, 2013).

Conclusion

This paper has explored a range of local actors involved in responding to pressures emanating from the Cold War in Africa that have hitherto mostly served as recipients of historical analysis. The conclusions include case studies and coverage of a wide geographical scope—from the eventful liberation struggle in Angola and the massive food crisis in Ethiopia after the fall of the Derg to the relative contingency of the independence process in Ghana. Some of these have looked at contested imperial transitions, and others at complex renegotiations of sovereignty in the aftermath of anticolonial struggles and rapid liberalizations. Local agencies have been probed within the diverse context of nationalist movements that have become governing parties and from the vantage point of new states.

Local actors played a crucial role in shaping political outcomes for their nations while external forces attempted to influence them. Yet this agency is rarely put in historical perspective in the literature on the global Cold War, which remains largely focused on the superpowers. Theoretical conceptualizations of the Cold War in Africa can underestimate the active role of negotiation and construction by local agents. Rethinking the local bio-political context in historical terms thus also entails a necessary critique of contemporary policy frameworks and how they might reflect or contradict these historical trajectories, along with the changing causal dynamics of violence and conflict that have contributed to the contemporary crisis.

Understanding the local agents involved in mediating different constellations of power and, in turn, being shaped by them is essential not only to grasp the complexity of African identities and histories but also because of the persistence of their effects. The end of the Cold War did not result in an end to the conflicts it helped ignite; for example, war in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Sudan, Somalia, and Liberia persisted well into the 1990s.

Following the Legacy of the Cold War in Africa, the socio-political landscape of Africa has been indelibly marked by the Cold War. Superpowers fought ideological battles and intervened in local quarrels using their satellite states. The consequences are still playing out in contemporary governance challenges the continent faces. One example is that of local governance. The Cold War rivals sponsored leaders publicly and financially, shaping the trajectory of the newly independent postcolonial nations. The fact that such leaders often came to power using violence and repression fostered grievances and resistance, leading to continuous tensions straddling the entire spectrum from civil protests to full-blown conflicts and civil wars. These local conditions set the operational context, and thus, the credibility and effectiveness of intervening actors in such hostile environments was and remains a serious challenge. Cold War rivalries had wrecked the socio-political systems of most African countries during the 1970s, and by the end of the '80s, the Soviet influence in Africa was almost eradicated. However, the legacy of the Cold War is still perceptible in many of the ex-battleground countries. An ethnographic exploration of a remote border area contested during the Cold War using mechanisms and attitudes legitimized and established back then is increasingly tense due to new resource discovery, highlighting how the past still has a strong grasp on the local living present. More research on the long-term effects of the Cold War on Africa seems necessary. It is already obvious that one has to look back into the past to see the present in a better light. Opening up the black box that, in most cases, Cold War conflict in Africa could lead to a better understanding of the seemingly inherently war-torn continent and is, thus, highly desirable to garner important new-time insights with old-time perspectives.

More than half a millennium ago, Niccolo Machiavelli emphasized that the ability to mediate and influence the outcome of a conflict required close attention to actors operating below the level of powerful states such as provinces and cities (or, in today's parlance, such as communities, tribes, et cetera). Local actors were central to an understanding of the dynamics of international relations (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Unfortunately, present-day approaches to global conflicts still often depict local actors as mere bystanders to the actions of powerful belligerents or policy-makers in distant capitals, or they reduce local politicians, insurgents, or organizers to passive victims.

However, a more nuanced view emphasizes that local agencies have particular advantages vis-à-vis "global" security actors. They often have superior knowledge of the operational environment, can navigate relationships of kinship and clientelism involving various political actors, and are often in a better position to exploit information gleaned from the community level. Local agencies may also possess a certain amount of what has been called "cultural intelligence." Against this backdrop, this brief reflection underscores the need to systematically integrate local perspectives to study global geopolitical analysis through several examples of global conflicts. Beyond academia, it will be argued that to arrive at sustainable and effective conflict resolution approaches, broader scholarly and policy-oriented approaches must consider local actors as crucial and creative agents in shaping conflict scenarios. In conclusion, it will be suggested that global conflicts – both past and present – should be re-imagined through a greater acknowledgment of local agency dynamics in various parts of the world (Obradović-Wochnik, 2020).

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